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*Down With Zoos!*

When I was younger I remember going on a field trip for school to the zoo. Our teacher told us it would be educational for us and I was too young to think otherwise. As an adult I have to ask myself, are zoos really as educational as people make them out to be? Are the animals in the zoo benefiting from the environment they have been placed in, or are zoos disrupting the animals emotionally, physically and mentally.

Zookeepers say that their main purpose is to protect endangered species and to educate people on the habitats of different species. People running zoos believe that they are helping endangered species by providing them with veterinary care, keeping them away from their predators and allowing captive breeding. Animals are constantly provided with food, which they did not catch on their own. Zoos claim that people become educated by the information that is provided by them to their customers and by giving their customers the ability to observe the animals’ behaviors. Many zoos over the past decade have “shifted their focus from preserving species through captive breeding programs to preserving habitats and species in the wild” (Kuehn 1). Lastly, zoos say that animals are able to be studied more rigorously and more closely when they are confined rather than in the wild.

The stress that an animal is put under due to captivity in an unnatural environment is enough evidence to cause the outlaw of zoos. Although many zoos claim their purpose is to protect endangered species, the habitat the animals are placed in at the zoo is smaller and most often nothing like their original habitat. The animals often suffer psychological damage due to the confinement that the zoos place them in. They often experience human contact, which for most of the exotic species at the zoo is unnatural. As for educating people, zoos are not educating anyone on the actual behavior of the species. The animals’ unusual behaviors in the zoo are a direct result of the psychological stress that they are under. People are not being educated on the animals because “the only way really to understand other species is to study them in their natural habitat and see how they interact socially” (Dixon 1). The captive breeding that does take place in zoos often results in in-breeding and birth defects; this can most often lead the species into more danger than they would be in their natural environment. Zookeepers are not helping the animals by feeding them either. In the wild an animals’ whole day is based around capturing prey. Zoos take away this action from them and leave them with performing unusual actions, such as a polar bear doing figure eights in a swimming pool.

Zoos are purely made for entertainment purposes and are an inhumane way to protect an endangered species. If the zoos are so concerned about protecting the endangered species then they should place the animals in a large sanctuary similar to their original habitat, where humans would not be able to roam around. In a zoo the animals are confined to small areas. They are unable to do the things that come natural to them, such as running, flying, foraging and choosing their mates. This is what causes psychological damage to them. Zoos are just an example of specism taking place. This is when people say that “human beings are indefinitely more powerful than any animals of any other species” (Singer 233). People are taking species out of their natural environment, so that we as humans can see them. Would you like an elephant to take you away from your home, and place you in a cage in the wild, for all the exotic animals to observe you? What makes us as humans the best species? What gives us the right to move an animal from its natural habitat? In 2003 the San Diego Wild Animal Park captured eleven African elephants. According to experts and scientists, “taking elephants from the wild is not only traumatic for them, it is also detrimental to their health” (PETA).

It seems as if zoos are not making any attempt to improve the conditions of the unnatural environment they are placing these wild animals in. Most of the funds that a zoo receives are not used to make more humane conditions for the animals, but are used for better refreshments stands and gift shops for the people who come to see animals in captivity (PETA). Clearly, a zoo’s main priority is for the humans that attend the zoo to be satisfied, rather than the animals that are confined. According to Edwin Wollert, zoos are “becoming little more than theme parks with expensive, but alive, exhibits” (Wollert 1).

According to the people who run zoos, zoos are supposed to be a place of conservation, education, and research, but are in fact just places of entertainment, confinement and neglect. People capture endangered or exotic species in the wild and place them captive in a zoo only to attract more people to the zoo, so they can make more money. These animals are being removed from their large spatial natural environment and are being placed in small confined cages in zoos. If one wants to protect an endangered species, the proper way to do this is to place them in a large sanctuary, similar to their natural environment, and to not allow human beings to roam or taunt. “Wild animals belong in the wild, not imprisoned in the zoos… freedom is a precious concept, and wild animals suffer physically and mentally from the lack of freedom captivity imposes” (McKenna 2003).

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